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# Understanding Audience Experience in an Anti-Expert Age: A Survey of Theatre Audience Research

## **Abstract:**

Researchers who seek to capture and analyse audiences' responses are facing a dilemma. In an international political climate beleaguered by efforts to delegitimise expertise, what are the implications for a research tradition that seeks to complexify value? In light of interest generated by the 2009 publication of Helen Freshwater's *Theatre & Audience* and the subsequent launch in January 2017 of the international Network for Audience Research in the Performing Arts (iNARPA), the time seems ripe for a detailed critical overview of the audience studies tradition. By revealing the potentials and limitations of the field, this article seeks to query how future empirical projects might productively investigate theatrical spectatorship in a post-truth world.

**Keywords:** theatre, spectatorship, cultural value, expertise, audience response

## **Introduction**

January 2017 saw the launch of a new international network for audience research in the performing arts. Co-organised by Ben Walmsley at the University of Leeds (UK) and Katya Johanson at Deakin University (Australia), iNARPA is to be welcomed as the first concerted effort to bring together the trend of theatrical audience studies and reception research into a cohesive tradition.<sup>1</sup> The birth of iNARPA therefore seems the apposite moment to survey this fast-developing field and to point to its potential future directions. By grounding contemporary cultural value research within the historical trajectory of audience studies as a whole, this article intends to shine a critical lens on current assumptions and practices.

More overtly, this article suggests that the need for such a critical overview has been made acute by shifts in the global political landscape. It is my contention that the teen years of the new millennium have seen audience research becoming trapped between two colliding agendas. Whereas on the one hand there is a growing pressure to celebrate cultural participation in all its contradictory forms, there is on the other hand a simultaneous imperative to push back against the encroaching delegitimisation of expertise on a global scale. By detailing this tension, this article seeks to identify a very specific dilemma confronting those who research cultural experience. To phrase this in the form of a question: what are the implications of the rise of ‘post-truth’ politics to a field that as a whole has consciously sought to understand aesthetic value from myriad perspectives? And what claims to truth does this research approach actually seek to make?

## **Post-Truth and Anti-Expertise**

Every November, Oxford Dictionaries chooses a new term as its ‘word of the year’. In 2016 that dubious honour was given to ‘post-truth’, a phrase that has been in circulation for over a decade but which, according to Oxford Dictionaries, experienced a spike in frequency as that eventful year wore on. Defining post-truth as an adjective ‘[r]elating to or denoting

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<sup>1</sup> University of Leeds (<http://www.pci.leeds.ac.uk/news/dr-ben-walmsley-to-develop-new-international-network-for-audience-research>).

circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief', editors identified an increase in usage of around 2,000% in 2016 over 2015: a trend they dually assigned to the June decision for the United Kingdom to leave the European Union, and to the United States' Presidential victory in August of Donald Trump.<sup>2</sup> Accordingly, while in many years the Oxford Dictionaries' UK and US offices have chosen different annual winners,<sup>3</sup> in 2016 the teams combined forces across the Atlantic to come to the same decision.

The company's President Casper Grathwohl called this decision the reflection of 'a year dominated by highly-charged political and social discourse', with the concept of post-truth having been '[f]uelled by the rise of social media as a news source and a growing distrust of facts offered up by the establishment'. For this reason, Grathwohl went on to say, 'I wouldn't be surprised if post-truth becomes one of the defining words of our time'.<sup>4</sup>

Whilst undeniably claiming a certain contemporary currency in 2016, it is nonetheless important to acknowledge that the post-truth phenomenon did not spring fully-formed from the political upheavals of that year. The first recorded use of the term as defined above was by political commentator Steve Tesich in an article in January 1992. Tesich took up the phrase to describe a 'Watergate syndrome' in which the spiralling revelations surrounding Richard Nixon's 1974 impeachment and resignation made people begin to withdraw from sordid reality. For Tesich, Watergate was a watershed moment. Whereas up until that point political dictators had needed to

work hard at suppressing the truth [...], [w]e, by our actions, are saying that this is no longer necessary, that we have acquired a spiritual mechanism that can denude truth of any significance. In a very fundamental way we, as a free people, have freely decided that we want to live in some post-truth world.

As Richard Horton argues in an article for *The Lancet*, the post-truth world of today can therefore only be understood as 'a hyperversion of what we have been living with for some

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<sup>2</sup> Alison Flood, "'Post-truth' Named Word of the Year by Oxford Dictionaries', (15 Nov 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/nov/15/post-truth-named-word-of-the-year-by-oxford-dictionaries>).

<sup>3</sup> For example, in 2009 the UK chose 'simples' whereas the US chose 'unfriend'.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

time'.<sup>5</sup> Nonetheless, while the public sphere can never be said to have been a playground of honesty, back in 2004 Ralph Keyes identified a 'growing suspicion that more lies than ever are being told'. In *The Post-Truth Era*, the first full-length exploration of the origins of post-factual discourse, Keyes argued that while deception has always been threaded throughout history, it is only recently that the 'routinisation of dishonesty' has become institutionalised, embedded within all levels of public and private life. Flourishing in 'an ethical twilight zone', post-truthfulness is now wielded as a tool for individual gain by enabling people 'to dissemble without considering ourselves dishonest. When our behavior conflicts with our values, what we're most likely to do is reconceive our values [...] [and] devise alternative approaches to morality'.<sup>6</sup> Christopher J. Gilbert ties this phenomenon into the affective philosophies of theorists such as Deleuze and Foucault, who both identify a tension between the capacity 'to "feel" truth rather than "know" [...] in any pure, rational way'. If truth is actually 'something to be manipulated according to particular, even personalized, interests', it should then be studied as a 'rhetorical force' rather than as 'a sieve of facticity'. Here facts matter less than forces: in the global political realm, it is clear that power increasingly originates not from the truth or falsity of judgments but from the collective will that drives them.<sup>7</sup>

It would also be a mistake to assume that this phenomenon is confined to Anglocentric contexts. For example, Sundar Sarukkai's article 'The Age of Post-Truth Politics' finds permeations within the 'theatre of politics' in India.<sup>8</sup> The result of all this has been a fracturing international political climate in which spokespeople frame debates as appeals to emotion rather than to evidence. Post-truth is therefore situated within a global movement towards anti-intellectualism: a movement that moreover, as Jonathan Chait points out, contains oddly snobbish properties, with the 2016 US election featuring Donald Trump famously flattering his supporters, praising the 'authenticity' of their views and claiming the

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<sup>5</sup> Horton, 'Difficult Truths about a Post-Truth World' (1 Apr 2017, [http://thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(17\)30878-4/fulltext](http://thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(17)30878-4/fulltext)).

<sup>6</sup> Keyes, *The Post-Truth Era* (New York: Macmillan), p. 13.

<sup>7</sup> Gilbert, '#NotIntendedToBeAFactualStatement', in Jason Hannan (ed.) *Truth in the Public Sphere* (Vancouver, Lexington Books, 2016), pp. 93-114, p. 100-101.

<sup>8</sup> Sarukkai, 'The Age of Post-Truth Politics' (22 Nov 2016, <http://www.thehindu.com/opinion/lead/The-age-of-post-truth-politics/article16672033.ece>).

antitheticality of education and so-called 'smarts'.<sup>9</sup> Crucially, therefore, post-truth rhetoric relies on a fundamental decentering of knowledge, in which those who know the most are deemed to understand the least. A post-truth culture is impossible without anti-expertise.

Indeed: the people, we were told, have officially had enough of experts. This now-infamous soundbite was offered by the UK politician Michael Gove during his pro-Leave campaign prior to the EU referendum.<sup>10</sup> Within a public discourse beset by conflicts between 'multiple seams of misinformation',<sup>11</sup> evidence itself has through such political machinations gained the taint of elitism, its bearers derided for stifling debate and for being out of touch with mass sentiment. This is the thesis of a recent book *The Death of Expertise* (2017), in which US political scientist Tom Nichols outlines a critical tension. On the one hand, the globalised reach of hypercommunication affords a range of positive social impacts, not least of which is the democratisation of knowledge and consequential expansion of public participation in political discourse. On the other hand, this potential for increased erudition is endangered by the very mechanism by which it is enabled. The removal of traditional gatekeepers (such as news editors) from the arena of public debate has led to social media sites, blogospheres, and comments sections becoming awash with competing news, both evidence-based and 'fake'. The result of all this, Nichols argues, is 'the utterly illogical insistence that every opinion should have equal weight'.<sup>12</sup>

This is why some prefer to use the term 'post-fact' instead:<sup>13</sup> because in a post-factual world, it is individual lived experience rather than factually-informed argument that is ipso facto rendered 'truth'. This echoes the tension that Gilbert draws out between 'brute facts' and 'the "rawness" of felt experience' (100). Deploying US comedian Stephen Colbert's term 'truthiness' to describe a kind of 'affective truth', Gilbert lambasts the contemporary tendency to rely on 'gut feeling': a rationale that asserts a kind of deep, visceral wisdom, but in actuality relies all too often on a wholesale rejection of facts.

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<sup>9</sup> Chait, 'The Oddly Snobbish Anti-Intellectualism of Donald Trump', *New York Magazine* (26 October 2016, <http://nymag.com/daily/intelligencer/2016/10/the-oddly-snobbish-anti-intellectualism-of-donald-trump.html>).

<sup>10</sup> See e.g. Henry Mance, 'Britain has had enough of experts, says Gove', *The Financial Times* (3 June 2016, <https://www.ft.com/content/3be49734-29cb-11e6-83e4-abc22d5d108c>).

<sup>11</sup> Margaret McCartney, 'Evidence in a Post-Truth World', *British Medical Journal* 355 (2016), pp. 355.

<sup>12</sup> Nichols, *The Death of Expertise* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

<sup>13</sup> See e.g. Farhad Manjoo, *True Enough: Learning to Live in a Post-Fact Society* (Oxford: Wiley, 2008).

For the cultural value researcher it is possible to see in all this an ethical quandary. When constructing models of aesthetic judgment, to whom should we be listening? If, as Nichols posits, 'the perverse effect of the death of expertise is that, without real experts, *everyone is an expert on everything*', then whose ideas about art – about what it should 'be' and 'do' – should be deemed to count? This has pertinence for the present article because the baseline of audience research is the belief that audiences are the experts of their own experiences. People get many different things out of theatrical encounters by applying various systems of criteria: no one approach should be taken more or less seriously than any other.<sup>14</sup> This philosophy finds echoes in the field of cultural studies more generally, which has seen concerted attempts to step away from deficit models of engagement and to recognise – and legitimate – alternative forms of participation. This has manifested most recently as a growing impatience at inadequate interrogations of *value*, with the new millennium seeing a convergence of long-running debates about both the benefits of cultural reception and how they might be studied.

In 2009 Eleonora Belfiore posited that the socio-economic impact of the arts has been 'one of the defining themes of cultural policy in Britain and beyond over the past 10–15 years'<sup>15</sup>. However, studies have tended to take the form of 'impact' and/or 'advocacy research': either by focusing solely on demographic segmentation of audiences as a means of developing better methods of attraction, or by designing qualitative studies that set out to prove the taken-for-granted benefits of arts activity.<sup>16</sup> The launch in 2012 by the UK's Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) of a 70-studies-strong Cultural Value Project was the first major initiative that sought to address this imbalance by 'put[ting] the experience of individuals back at the heart of ideas about cultural value'.<sup>17</sup> Rather than relying on professionally-implicated commentators to ascertain the intrinsic value of cultural experiences, or on the production of big data to quantify the benefits of the arts, the AHRC's

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<sup>14</sup> In fact, the ethnomusicologist Patrick Burke posits that aesthetic relativism should be considered the default position of audience research ['What is Music?', *Humanities*, 36, 1 (2015)].

<sup>15</sup> Belfiore 'On Bullshit in Cultural Policy Practice and Research', *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, 15, 3 (2009), pp. 343-59, p. 348.

<sup>16</sup> See e.g. the valuable literature review provided by John Holden, 'Cultural Value and the Crisis of Legitimacy: Why Culture Needs a Democratic Mandate' (London: Demos, 2006).

<sup>17</sup> Geoffrey Crossick and Patrycja Kaszynska. 'Understanding the Value of Arts & Culture: The AHRC Cultural Value Project', AHRC (2016), <http://www.ahrc.ac.uk/documents/publications/cultural-value-project-final-report>, accessed 5 January 2017.

Cultural Value Project placed centre-stage the myriad impacts, knowledges, and understandings of individual participants. Following on from this, the AHRC's £1.5 million 'Understanding Everyday Participation' project specifically set out to counter deficit models of arts inclusion: this time by studying the meanings people invest in their everyday activities. Contemporaneously, too, the launch in 2014 of the now-global Fun Palaces Campaign has generated a powerful international movement working to challenge the very concept of cultural worth, by championing the artistic powers of everybody. Whether making art or receiving it, producing or responding, these initiatives signal a growing crusade to position everyday individuals as experts of creative experience.

But to what extent does this movement risk rejecting the knowledge systems of those who have dedicated years, decades, entire careers to studying the arts? If, as Nichols argues, the rise in post-truth thinking has come about via a dangerous rejection 'not only of knowledge, but of the ways in which we gain knowledge', how might audience research avoid fundamentally devaluing the legitimacy of critical routes into aesthetic experience? Or to ask a different order of question: what are the political implications of understanding cultural value as a diverse spectrum of perspectives? Before this question can be answered it is necessary to engage in critical consideration of what audience research has historically sought to do with the responses it captures.

## **A Brief History of the Audience Studies Field**

What I call 'audience research' can broadly be defined as that which works to gather and analyse a range of individual spectatorial reactions. This is a field with a long and distinct history.

Tracking how public understanding has evolved in response to shifting social concerns, Richard Butsch argues that discourse about audiences 'most often has occurred when others considered them problematic'<sup>18</sup>. This is why audience studies as a defined area has largely been confined to television and cinema, with the earliest systematic audience

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<sup>18</sup> Butsch, *The Citizen Audience: Crowds, Publics and Individuals* (New York: Routledge, 2008), p. 1.



research – the ‘effects’ tradition – specifically growing out of social concerns about new media forms. In fact, cultural studies’ very germination came about as part of a series of moral panics, driven by fear of ‘the Orwellian spectre’ of ‘mass society’ and the passivity-inducing effects of powerful cinematic and televisual entertainments. This mythical mass audience was considered ‘grey, uniform, anomic, faceless, gullible, and defenceless against the power of the propagandist’.<sup>19</sup>

The genesis of audience studies can therefore be traced back as far as the 1930s, into the mid-war birth of propaganda research. While initial projects were driven by urgent need to analyse the impacts of propaganda, they quickly adopted the aim of developing working models for actually *doing* propaganda.<sup>20</sup> This nefarious intent was then carried back into academia and renamed ‘mass communications research’: a field which was further developed in the 1940s according to the Frankfurt School’s infamous and Marxist-informed ‘hypodermic’ model, in which media ‘messages’ were conceptualised as injected directly into the hearts and minds of viewers. Proponents of the hypodermic model believed that media creates a homogenised mass of passive audiences, leading to ‘widespread fear that its effects might be deleterious, especially to supposedly weak minds’.<sup>21</sup>

Why is this important? Because the research that is recognised today as part of the broad field of ‘audience studies’<sup>22</sup> consciously developed *against* the effects tradition. While early pessimistic models focused on finding proof of assumed effects, more recent work has explored how differentiated audiences find meaning and pleasure in their viewing practices. As Kim Schrøder et al. put it, ‘the age of the recipient has been superseded by the age of the

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<sup>19</sup> Frank Biocca, ‘Opposing Conceptions of the Audience: The Active and Passive Hemispheres of Mass Communication Theory’, James A. Anderson, ed., *Communication Yearbook 11* (Abingdon: SAGE Publications, 2012), pp. 51–80, p. 56.

<sup>20</sup> Timothy Richard Glander, *Origins of Mass Communications Research During the American Cold War* (New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2000).

<sup>21</sup> Karl Erik Rosengren and Klaus Bruhn Jensen, ‘Five Traditions in Search of the Audience’, *European Journal of Communication*, 5 (2009), pp. 207–38, p. 209.

<sup>22</sup> Of course, not all empirical research into theatre audiences has grown directly out of the ‘audience studies’ tradition, which I identify here as a distinct field having evolved as a sub-set of cultural studies. Some theatre audience researchers are embedded in alternative traditions of arts management, cultural policy, or ethnography; the comments on methodological and analytical approaches in this article therefore do not presume to speak for everyone. Rather, I am interested here in providing a critical background for understanding the cultural studies tradition of audience research that Freshwater describes in *Theatre & Audience* (2009): as ‘characterised by a rejection of the notion of “the audience” as a singular or homogenous entity, a detailed interrogation of diverse and sometimes unexpected responses, and an ethnographic engagement with the range of cultural conditions which inform an individual’s viewing position’ (p. 28).

user'.<sup>23</sup> So whereas effects research asked what media *does to people*, the second wave was called the Uses & Gratifications (U&G) approach, and was developed in the USA in the 1940s-50s to ask instead what people *do with media*.<sup>24</sup> Rather than believing audiences to be passive recipients of media messages, U&G credited viewers with playing an active role in the creation of meaning.<sup>25</sup>

Driven by a burgeoning advertising industry, the U&G approach was predominantly concerned with understanding audiences' needs in order to better sell them things, and so its epistemological applications were very limited. However, U&G's urge to refocus attention on viewer activity was carried into the third iteration of audience research: the British cultural studies movement, spearheaded by the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS). Rather than deconstructing media texts in order to pinpoint their effects, what the CCCS did was, in Raymond Williams' words, to insist that 'culture is ordinary': inextricably woven into the fabric of everyday life.<sup>26</sup> This research tended to exhibit what Michael O'Shaughnessy calls a 'socialist perspective',<sup>27</sup> in that it specifically worked to uncover how 'the distribution of power in society is paralleled by the distribution of meanings in texts'.<sup>28</sup> While initial CCCS research focused on the uses of media by men, and chiefly those embedded in spectacular male youth sub-cultures (see e.g. work by David Morley<sup>29</sup>, Stuart Hall and Tony Jefferson,<sup>30</sup> and Richard Hoggart)<sup>31</sup>, later feminist authors considered how media usage was integrated into the daily lives of women (see e.g.

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<sup>23</sup> Schrøder, Catherine Murray, Kirsten Drotner and Steve Kline, *Researching Audiences: A Practical Guide to Methods in Media Audience Analysis* (Bloomsbury Academic: London, 2003), p. vii.

<sup>24</sup> Rosengren and Jensen, p. 208.

<sup>25</sup> U&G only really came to prominence in the 1970s-80s through the work of researchers such as Elihu Katz and Denis McQuail, who aimed to produce a system by which people's needs could be classified and thereby met. A useful explication of the advances and limitations of the U&G approach is provided by David Morley's chapter 'Changing Paradigms in Audience Studies' (1989), while an overall summary of how the social and political forces of different nations shaped the development of their respective research approaches can be found in Barry Gunter's *Media Research Methods*.

<sup>26</sup> Williams, *Resources of Hope: Culture, Democracy, Socialism* (London: Verso, 1989), p. 13-4.

<sup>27</sup> O'Shaughnessy, 'Box Pop: Popular Television and Hegemony', Andrew Goodwin & Garry Whannel (ed.s), *Understanding Television*, (Routledge: London, 1990), pp. 88-102, p. 91.

<sup>28</sup> John Fiske, *Television Culture* (London: Methuen & Co, 1987), p. 272.

<sup>29</sup> Morley, *The Nationwide Audience* (London: BFI, 1980).

<sup>30</sup> Hall and Jefferson, *Resistance Through Rituals: Youth Subcultures in Post-war Britain* (Routledge: London, 1993).

<sup>31</sup> Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy* (London: Transaction Publishers, 2004).

work by Angela McRobbie and Jenny Garber,<sup>32</sup> Janice Radway,<sup>33</sup> and Ien Ang<sup>34</sup>. Both iterations have been usefully summarised by David Sholle as the combined foundation of a 'reading for resistance' approach, in which audiences were studied for the extent of their resistance to imposed preferred meanings. Sholle situates this overemphasis on resistance as a backlash against the effects tradition: academic discomfort with the passive figuration of media audiences led to an overwhelming focus 'on agency and a reconceptualization of the audience as active and involved'.<sup>35</sup>

What all this demonstrates is the extent to which historical audience research was caught up in a binary distinction, whereby certain studies sought to prove the existence of powerful media influence while others worked to capture evidence of powerful audience activity. More recently, however, researchers have attempted to bridge the gap by exploring how the activities surrounding media production can complexly influence the situated activity of audience reception. There is now widespread agreement of the need to study cultural engagements not as an aberrant (or even deviant) individualised activity but as a fundamental part of lived experience: as 'embedded acts of consumption'.<sup>36</sup> To put it differently: whereas the first wave asked what culture does *to* audiences, and the following iterations asked what audiences do *with* culture, contemporary studies tend to adopt a third position: by asking how culture *matters* to audiences. This approach understands the act of audiencing to be the adoption of complex strategies used by individuals to manage their expectations of and responses to cultural events. It is these strategies that audience research has sought to capture, by paying attention to both discursive and extra-discursive markers of response.

In terms of its approach to reception, audience studies must therefore be considered entirely separate to the model described by Susan Bennett in her pioneering 1997 book *Theatre Audiences*. While undeniably valuable in its urge to consider how all the factors

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<sup>32</sup> McRobbie and Garber, *Girls and Subcultures* (London: Routledge, 1977).

<sup>33</sup> Radway, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy and Popular Literature* (New York: University of North Carolina Press, 1984).

<sup>34</sup> Ang, *Watching Dallas* (London: Methuen, 1985).

<sup>35</sup> Sholle, 'Reading the Audience, Reading Resistance: Prospects and Problems', *Journal of Film and Video*, 43, 1 (1991), pp. 80-9, p. 81.

<sup>36</sup> Shaun Moores, *Interpreting Audiences: the Ethnography of Media Consumption* (London: SAGE Publications, 2000), p. 8.

surrounding cultural participation will necessarily shape audience experience, Bennett's work 'focuses more on culturally specific paratheatrical determinants of audience reception than on actual spectatorial strategies of viewing',<sup>37</sup> and so can not be considered part of the audience research tradition. Whereas, as Janelle Reinelt explains, the spectatorship work pioneered by authors such as Bennett and Herbert Blau has sought either to theoretically frame 'the problems of the audience' or to describe 'the reception of particular performances' through critically-informed descriptions of aesthetics and phenomenology<sup>38</sup>, audience studies has been built upon a shared commitment to mapping the ways diverse audience members make sense of and find meaning in their own experiences. Conversely, where theatre studies *has* tried to capture data on audience experience in the past, this often requires scholars to work with researchers from other disciplines<sup>39</sup>, or to talk to a few handpicked attendees (who are often professionally or academically involved in theatre themselves).<sup>40</sup>

This article is by no means the first to note the relative dearth of dedicated audience research within theatre studies. Cited in more than 150 texts to date, Helen Freshwater's 2009 book *Theatre & Audience*<sup>41</sup> has been probably the most influential intervention calling out the 'curious – and [...] telling – omission' within performance scholarship of 'the theories and analytic approaches generated by cultural studies'.<sup>42</sup> However, it is also crucial to note (as does Freshwater) that this omission has never been entire. To give a very brief overview of the pockets of activity that *have* applied audience studies methods to theatre it is necessary to go back as early as the 1980s, when academics in northern Europe began conducting studies around a working group on reception hosted by the International Federation for Theatre Research. An influential early iteration, Willmar Sauter's Theatre

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<sup>37</sup> Elizabeth Sakellaridou, 'Audience Control, British Political Theatre and the Pinter Method', *Gamma 2* (1994), pp. 159–170, p. 161.

<sup>38</sup> Reinelt, 'What UK Spectators Know: Understanding How We Come to Value Theatre', *Theatre Journal*, 66, 3 (2014), pp. 337–61, p. 337.

<sup>39</sup> See e.g. Bruce McConachie's foray into neuroscience, detailed in *Engaging Audiences* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

<sup>40</sup> See e.g. Sophie Nield, 'The Rise of the Character Named Spectator', *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 18, 4 (2008), pp. 531–544; or Deirdre Heddon, Helen Iball and Rachel Zerihan, 'Come Closer: Confessions of Intimate Spectators in One to One Performance', *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 22, 1 (2012), pp. 120–133.

<sup>41</sup> Freshwater, *Theatre & Audience* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

<sup>42</sup> Freshwater, p. 27.

Talks, began to investigate how audience members encountered and made sense of performance events through inter-spectatorial discussions.<sup>43</sup> The Theatre Talks approach has continued to play an ongoing if relatively tangential part in European theatre studies to date.<sup>44</sup> Within the UK, too, John Tulloch<sup>45</sup> and (with exceptional consistency) Matthew Reason<sup>46</sup> have both produced foundational studies that extended Sauter et al's enquiry into audiences' sense-making processes, with lesser-cited interventions including one-off papers by Susan Kippax<sup>47</sup> and Martin Barker.<sup>48</sup> Another UK author who deserves note is Ben Walmsley,<sup>49</sup> whose trajectory to theatre audiences via a tradition of arts management and cultural policy research has been paralleled by a small contingent of researchers on the other side of the world, including the Australasian scholars Katya Johnson, Hillary Glow, Jennifer Radbourne, and Rebecca Scollen. However, until now these overwhelmingly Westernised cultural initiatives have seemed somewhat fragmented and isolatory, taking place on the fringes of different disciplines and lacking a central home.

The launch of iNARPA is just one sign that this is changing. Within theatre studies specifically, while Freshwater's book was at least partly a reflection of fermenting impatience at the tendency to make 'strong assertions about theatre's unique influence and impact upon audiences',<sup>50</sup> it has since provided a focal point from which alternative momentum might be built. Since 2009 there have been three separate special issues of journals on theatrical spectatorship. In 2010, the Australian journal *About Performance* published a special issue on 'Audiencing: The Work of the Spectator in Live Performance'; in 2015 I co-edited with Matthew Reason a special issue on 'Theatre Audiences' for the

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<sup>43</sup> Sauter, *The Theatrical Event: Dynamics of Performance and Perception* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2014).

<sup>44</sup> See e.g. Anja Mølle Lindelof and Louise Ejgod Hansen, 'Talking about Theatre: Audience Development through Dialogue', *Participations*, 12, 1 (May 2014), pp. 234-53.

<sup>45</sup> Tulloch, *Shakespeare and Chekhov in Production and Reception: Theatrical Events and their Audiences* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2005).

<sup>46</sup> See e.g. Reason, *The Young Audience: Exploring and Enhancing Children's Experiences of Theatre* (Staffordshire: Trentham Books, 2010).

<sup>47</sup> Kippax, 'Women as Audience', in Paddy Scannell, Philip Schlesinger and Colin Sparks (ed.s) *Culture and Power* (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 1992), pp. 239-56.

<sup>48</sup> Barker 'Crash, Theatre Audiences, and the Idea of "Liveness"', *Studies in Theatre and Performance*, 23, 1 (2003), pp. 21-39.

<sup>49</sup> See e.g. Walmsley "'A Big Part of my Life": A Qualitative Study of the Impact of Theatre', *Arts Marketing: an International Journal*, 3, 1 (2013), pp. 73-87.

international audience research journal *Participations*; in 2016, the *Journal of Contemporary Drama in English* produced an issue called 'Theatre and Spectatorship' featuring contributions to a conference held in Barcelona the previous year. Of these, it is notable that only the *Participations* special issue was significantly concerned with empirical research. However, this collection can be read together with a range of additional endeavours. One of the projects that received AHRC Cultural Value funding was a major study undertaken by the British Theatre Consortium, the findings of which have been detailed in articles by Chris Megson and Janelle Reinelt<sup>51</sup> and by Julie Wilkinson.<sup>52</sup> In addition, the past few years have seen: a collection called *The Audience Experience* (2014) edited by Radbourne, Johnson, and Glow; an important intercultural project investigating audiences' responses to the Globe's worldwide touring production of *Hamlet*;<sup>53</sup> a generous grant from the British Academy to support my own three-year study of regional theatre audiences;<sup>54</sup> and a burgeoning series of publications by early-career researchers like Jan Wozniak,<sup>55</sup> Evelyn O'Malley,<sup>56</sup> Maria Barrett<sup>57</sup>, and Rose Biggin.<sup>58</sup> Taken together, these perhaps confirm what Matthew Reason and I suggested in our introduction to the *Participations* special issue: that it might be time to stop bemoaning the absence of theatre audience research. Nonetheless, it seems fair to agree with Freshwater and Reinelt that this dedicated engagement with long-standing audience studies frameworks has until fairly recently been sidelined from the performance studies mainstream.

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<sup>50</sup> Freshwater, p. 3.

<sup>51</sup> Megson and Reinelt. 'Performance, Experience, Transformation', *Journal of Contemporary Drama in English*, 4, 1 (2016), pp. 227-42.

<sup>52</sup> Wilkinson, 'Dissatisfied Ghosts: Theatre Spectatorship and the Production of Cultural Value', *Participations*, 12, 1 (May 2015), pp. 133-53.

<sup>53</sup> Shakespeare's Globe, [www.shakespearesglobe.com/education/library-research/current-research-projects#B](http://www.shakespearesglobe.com/education/library-research/current-research-projects#B) (2017).

<sup>54</sup> British Academy, <http://www.britac.ac.uk/postdoctoral-fellowships-%E2%80%93-2016-awards> (2016).

<sup>55</sup> Wozniak, *The Politics of Performing Shakespeare for Young People: Standing up to Shakespeare* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2016).

<sup>56</sup> O'Malley, 'You Do (Not) Assist the Storm: A Vibrant and Affective Seascape for *The Tempest* at Minack, Cornwall', *Performance Research*, 21, 2 (2016), pp. 81-84.

<sup>57</sup> Barrett, *Our Place: Class, the Theatre Audience and the Royal Court Liverpool* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, forthcoming).

<sup>58</sup> Biggin, *Immersive Theatre and Audience Experience* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017)

Freshwater was not the first to ask why this might be. For example, in 2007 prominent audience researcher Martin Barker offered the following provocation:

The sad thing to me is just how rarely, in the fields of drama and performance, scholars even see that there is a problem, and a need, to know concrete things about audiences. The rot was confirmed by Susan Bennett who, after her *Theatre Audiences* became the source of just about all knowledge/ignorance on the topic, followed it up with an essay in which she effectively declared that research into actual audiences was unnecessary... since theatre companies were already doing it (asking people what they liked, and why they came...). Oh dearie me, that's a bit of a lacuna.<sup>59</sup>

Referring to Bennett's article 'Theatre Audiences, Redux', which saw 'little need or merit' in academic audience research in light of the proliferation of industry-led evaluative studies,<sup>60</sup> Barker points to the risk of assuming that because professional and governmental organisations have been conducting research into audience engagement for many years, there is no place for academic researchers seeking to do the same. As Belfiore's work powerfully demonstrates, however, the kinds of questions that each approach seeks to ask have been markedly dissimilar. Belfiore argues that while impact evaluation has a clear use value in terms of its marketing and outreach implications, the epistemological reach of such studies is limited: projects have tended to focus solely on capturing the economic and social factors that encourage people to engage (or prevent them from engaging) in cultural events, and then on identifying the extrinsic outcomes of this activity.<sup>61</sup>

The above explanation goes some way to contesting a common criticism levelled at the empirical approach: namely, its supposed links to market research. Indeed, cinema and television have both been the subject of decades of focus group research, funded by production companies as deliberate attempts to make their products more marketable. However, whereas market research tends to operate under a simplifying agenda, working to make people sufficiently knowable in order to better sell them things, the *scholarly*

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<sup>59</sup> Barker, 'Review of *British Pantomime Performance*, e.d Millie Taylor', *Participations* 5, 1 (May 2008).

<sup>60</sup> Bennett, 'Theatre Audiences, Redux', *Theatre Survey* 47, 2 (2006), pp. 225–230, p. 228.

<sup>61</sup> Like Belfiore, we too must be careful to avoid disconnecting audience research from its political context. Janelle Reinelt's 2014 article 'What UK Spectators Know' offers an exemplary analysis of the connection between the rise in cultural value research and historical governmental impact agendas, explaining how 'the evidence of "real" spectatorship has become important [...] [i]n light of the disastrous economic downturn (2008-09) [and] a knock-on crisis for the arts' (p. 340).

discipline of audience studies has had as its broad shared aim the desire to seek out those places where simplistic assumptions about audiences are produced and, through empirical research, to unpick them: by showing that actual spectators respond in ways that are far more complex and multifaceted than such narrow figurations conclude.

To offer a concrete example: the foundational fandom research of Henry Jenkins was driven by frustrations with the common assumption that fans have an unhealthy reliance on media texts, a relationship that replaces (and prohibits) 'normal' engagement with the real world.<sup>62</sup> Jenkins' work opened the door to showing that people actually find many different kinds of pleasures in their cultural engagements: how, far from being loners, many fans form distinct communities around media texts and are not the passive, atomised recipients of media messages that common representations suggest.<sup>63</sup> More than being just a parallel strand to market research, then, the history of post-1940s academic audience research is one of concerted efforts to undermine its very foundations: to challenge what Barrie Gunter calls the 'sociology of mass persuasion'<sup>64</sup> by mapping audiences' responses in all their active complexity.

But how practically might this rather grandiose aim be achieved? And what claims to knowledge can audience research truly seek to make? These are essential points that must be answered if this article is to go any way in addressing its opening provocation, about the potential dangers of a research approach that seeks to recognise – and legitimate – the proliferation of different kinds of expertise.

## Understanding Experience as Subjective

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<sup>62</sup> Jenkins, *Textual Poachers* (New York: Routledge, 1992).

<sup>63</sup> Although containing many examples of excellent and necessary work, fan-studies has nonetheless been criticised for providing an overly celebratory view of fandom. As Martin Barker states, certain texts verge on taking a 'devotional attitude to its fans, which has gone far enough in some hands to want to treat [them] as a kind of radical political resistance movement' ['Kicked into the Gutters', *International Journal of Comic Art*, 4, 1 (2002), pp. 64-77, p. 75].

<sup>64</sup> Gunter, *Media Research Methods: Measuring Audiences, Reactions and Impact* (London: Sage, 1999), p. 11.



Writing about critical frameworks for immersive theatre analysis, Adam Alston suggests that while empirical research methods

have much to offer to our understanding of audience engagement in a range of settings, the position of an audience member who approaches immersive theatre “from the inside” as an opinionated theorist can still be – and perhaps *ought* to be – harnessed as a *critical* position, even if it is not an *objective* position (which would seem a difficult ambition to achieve).<sup>65</sup>

To Alston’s assertion, this article presents no argument. A spectator with a creative and/or scholarly background in performance will naturally have access to certain kinds of language and awareness, and will draw on interlocking professional (as well as personal) orientations when analysing theatrical experience. As an ‘insider’ position this approach is, as Alston points out, able to produce particular kinds of knowledge. The same is true of audience research.

Here I return to that opening provocation. If global political systems are indeed experiencing an international collision of organised, effective, and injurious moves to delegitimise expertise, in what ways might audience research resist undermining professional systems of knowledge?

First, a potential misassumption of the empirical approach is that mapping a range of spectatorial perspectives entitles projects to claim a veneer of objectivity. In actuality, it is essential when conducting this kind of work to acknowledge the impossibility of finding out ‘the truth’ about audience experience. Audience studies is not a positivistic discipline claiming to produce ‘objective knowledge about the world through the application of tried-and-tested scientific methods’<sup>66</sup>; rather, it accepts that *all* articulations of aesthetic response will be always-already subjective, drawing on sometimes competing, sometimes complementary orientations. Broadly speaking, audience research intends to understand how different subjects, approaching theatrical events from varying directions, find in it alternative forms of value.

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<sup>65</sup> Alston, *Beyond Immersive Theatre: Aesthetics, Politics and Productive Participation* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), p. 26.

<sup>66</sup> Andy Ruddock, *Investigating Audiences* (London: SAGE Publications, 2007), p. 1.

Second, and connectedly, Alston reflects that aesthetic experience itself does not in any case 'arise from a fixed and stable meaning imposed on the spectator, but from an active decoding [...] of plural and malleable meanings'.<sup>67</sup> This evokes Jacques Rancière's thought-experiment in 'The Emancipated Spectator', an essay which has been extraordinarily influential within theatre studies in its call for an overarching dehierarchisation of knowledge.<sup>68</sup> Rancière's framework actively calls for an assumption of equality: a levelling of intelligence, in which the knowledge of the 'ignoramus' should be valued as highly as that of the expert.<sup>69</sup> Rather than 'some passive condition that we should transform into activity',<sup>70</sup> audiencing for Rancière is always-already a position of emancipation, with each spectator free to construct their own interpretation by 'composing her own poem with the element of the poem before her'; by 'refashioning [the performance] in her own way'.<sup>71</sup> As this article has explained, it is this interpretative spectatorial refashioning – this act of composition in action – that audience research seeks to capture.<sup>72</sup>

Significantly, however, this does not mean undermining the expert readings of those who write from professionally- and scholarly-informed perspectives. Whether clashing with or complementing each other, these critical voices produce indispensable knowledge about

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<sup>67</sup> Alston, p. 7.

<sup>68</sup> Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator* (London: Verso, 2009).

<sup>69</sup> It is worth making explicit that Rancière's framework developed against distinct frustrations with the work of Pierre Bourdieu. While Bourdieu's 'cultural capital' model famously embeds culture within a field of struggle (one that works to exclude those who, without the requisite forms of cultural capital, are unable to 'decode' aesthetic experience), Rancière disagreed with his starting point: the way Bourdieu's framework was built 'from a position in which inequality is assumed'. In other words, Rancière's challenge was to the Bourdieusian model's politically-neutered potentiality, which viewed inequality as the inevitable consequence of antagonistic knowledge. Rancière argued that in order to achieve equality we must work 'to assume it, to affirm it, to have it as one's epistemological starting point, and to then systematically verify it' [Caroline Pelletier, 'Emancipation, Equality and Education', *Discourse*, 30, 2 (2009), pp. 137-50, p. 142.]

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid*, p. 17.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid*, p. 13.

<sup>72</sup> The drive to widen our apprehension of knowledge has been reflected in the cultural value projects more widely, with major initiatives such as the AHRC's £1.5 million 'Understanding Everyday Participation' similarly addressing deficit models of arts participation: this time by studying the meanings people invest in their everyday activities. Contemporaneously, the launch in 2014 of the Fun Palaces Campaign has already generated a powerful international movement working to challenge the very concept of cultural worth, by championing the artistic powers of everybody. Whether making art or receiving it, producing or responding, these initiatives signal a growing crusade to position everyday individuals as experts of creative experience. This further connects with a perceived need to bridge the gap between 'elite' and 'popular' forms of cultural activity and to widen participation in the arts.

the productive potentials of performance and so are uniquely able to point towards aesthetic possibilities. Contrariwise, by exploring how ‘people bring basic perspectives, interpretations, cognitive schemas or social and cultural frames of reference with them to an interpretive situation’,<sup>73</sup> audience research aims to capture an understanding – albeit always partial, fragmentary, fleeting, and incomplete – of the differing criteria systems that are used by varying audiences in the act of finding meaning. The object of study here is not meaning itself but the pathways that bring people to those meanings; not ‘truth’, but the manoeuvres by which we navigate our ways to that particular truth. In other words, audience research engages in an entirely different form of epistemological enquiry to that of performance analysis. This is why Matthew Reason has argued persuasively that the act of remembering performances should be understood as an experience in its own right, ‘*connected but different*’ to our in-the-moment response<sup>74</sup>: because audience research is less about understanding experience per se than it is about understanding *how people understand* their own experiences. Rather than reducing value to an end-point (‘impact’, ‘benefit’, ‘outcome’, ‘result’), and instead of suggesting that this represents an objectively truthful understanding of aesthetic experience, audience research hopes to unveil something of the *processes* by which different people make sense of their performance encounters. The following section extends this analysis by explaining how such research has methodologically been managed.

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<sup>73</sup> Birgitta Höijer, ‘Ontological Assumptions and Generalizations in Qualitative (Audience) Research’, *European Journal of Communication*, 23, 3 (2008), pp. 275-94, p. 278.

<sup>74</sup> Matthew Reason, ‘Asking the Audience: Audience Research and the Experience of Theatre’, *About Performance*, 10 (2010), 15-34, p. 26.

## The Methods and Limitations of Audience Research

Although the traditional triad of interviews, questionnaires, and focus groups remains in common use, those researching arts audiences have also been active in the development of creative and participatory methodologies, in which respondents are positioned as co-creators of knowledge rather than subjects of analysis.<sup>75</sup> For example, Uwe Gröschel uses 'walking fieldwork' to take audiences back around the site of a previous promenade performance.<sup>76</sup> Reason has developed methods ranging from drawing and painting workshops to an application that asks audiences 'where in their body' a dance experience took place.<sup>77</sup> Lisa Baxter *et al.* have written about the use of 'metaphor elicitation' in drawing out how people feel about cultural institutions, presenting them with a series of images and asking them to choose those that best speak to their experiences.<sup>78</sup>

The aim is usually to draw out deeper forms of discursive (as well as extra-discursive) information on a range of aspects: 'sensuous', 'aesthetic', 'emotional', 'imaginative'.<sup>79</sup> In short, and to avoid speaking for others: I see the ultimate goal of my own research approach as being to *listen to audiences*. To pay attention as they reach for words to describe the indescribable. To pay attention to hesitations, confidence, certainties and uncertainties of expression. To hear not just *what* people say but *how* they say it. How do they come to their words, and how easily? Where does language stumble or fail; where do respondents use gestures and grimaces; where do they come up with unique turns of phrase, or fall back on tried-and-tested metaphors? And how can this attention give us a sense of the ways audiences take up subject positions in relation to the experience? How do they legitimise

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<sup>75</sup> It is worth noting that theatre studies is not the first to develop such creative techniques. To offer just a few such instances: in her book *Watching Dallas* Ien Ang reports receiving 42 letters in response to a magazine advert; Martin Barker's study of *2000AD* readers involved posting respondents a sheet of questions and a blank audio cassette ['Kicked into the Gutters: or, "My Dad doesn't read comics, he studies them"', *International Journal of Comic Art*, 4, 1 (2002), pp. 64-77]; and Karen Wood's research into *Strictly Come Dancing* asked respondents to keep a ten-week diary of personal reflections on the show ['An Investigation into Audiences' Televisual Experience of *Strictly Come Dancing*', *Participations*, 7, 2 (2010), pp. 262-291].

<sup>76</sup> Gröschel, 'Researching Audiences through Walking Fieldwork', *Participations*, 12, 1 (May 2015), pp. 349-67.

<sup>77</sup> Matthew Reason, 'Where in Your Body?', [www.matthewreason.com/portfolio/where-in-your-body](http://www.matthewreason.com/portfolio/where-in-your-body), accessed 5 January 2017.

<sup>78</sup> Lisa Baxter, Daragh O'Reilly and Elizabeth Carnegie, 'Innovative Methods of Inquiry into Arts Engagement', Jennifer Radbourne, Hilary Glow and Katya Johanson (ed.s), *The Audience Experience: A Critical Analysis of Audiences in the Performing Arts* (Bristol: Intellect, 2013), pp. 113-28.

<sup>79</sup> Barker et al, *Watching The Lord of the Rings*, p. 139.

this position-taking by drawing on varying knowledges and discourses: ideas about home, place, heritage, nation; senses of individual and community identity; wider aesthetic value systems, knowledges, and discourse? And what might all this say about the perceived place of theatre in people's lives, as well as in society more widely?<sup>80</sup> By asking these questions I aim to get a sense of the meaning-making process in action.

Critically, this requires me to keep asking what my approach enables me to know about the theatrical experience, and where its myopias lie. This is why those who write about empirical methods tend to emphasise the need for self-reflexivity, recognising that the presence of the researcher and the methods used will necessarily influence the kinds of generated talk. A useful example of how this actually works is the contrast between 'empirical' audience studies and its sibling, 'reception research'. Whereas empirical approaches seek to draw out responses by directly engaging audience members in new conversations, reception research gathers and analyses discourse that is already in circulation: often online via news articles, below-the-line commentary, YouTube video responses, social media posts, TripAdvisor reviews, blogs, and so on. The lack of scholarly intervention makes reception research especially able to uncover the ways people assert, legitimise, hedge, and debate their opinions in self-directed ways, forming communities and allegiances (as well as disputes and enmities) naturally around their lived cultural practices. This approach also brings with it new opportunities to watch as discussions evolve over time, as people contribute to threads for many months or even years. However, the methodological distance of reception research is also its weakness.<sup>81</sup> With no opportunity to guide the conversation, researchers are limited to gleaning insights from those tantalisingly rare things people choose to post about themselves. Empirical research is therefore better able to draw out information on people's subject positions (such as gender, age, location, occupation, and so on), and to capture a sense of how relevant aspects might feed into their sense-making processes.

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<sup>80</sup> \_\_\_\_\_, *Locating the Audience* (Bristol: Intellect, 2016), p. 11.

<sup>81</sup> Not the only weakness, of course. Reactions are self-selecting, meaning that it is very difficult to gather information on the 'quiet majority': those who watch and yet do not choose to post a response [\_\_\_\_\_, 'What's Bigger than a Standing Ovation?' Intimacy and Spectacle at the Tony Awards', *Studies in Musical Theatre*, 10, 1 (2016), pp. 37-53, p. 43]. Furthermore, our (overwhelmingly anglicized) models of digital discourse often result in persona obfuscation: the online presence of commentators may bear no resemblance to who they are in real life. There are also significant ethical issues that must be considered when conducting covert research online.

But to what extent is either approach *representative* of the audience ‘as a whole’? The answer is impossible to gauge – and more importantly, the question itself somewhat misses the point. Because audience studies analyses discourse *in context*. This is the epistemological heart of its approach, and requires us to ask an entirely different order of question. For example: what might it mean to spontaneously leave a public comment on an online video of a once-live performance? How does an audience member during a one-on-one interview navigate their reactions against the perceived status of the researcher? How do focus group participants use rhetorical manoeuvres to reach shared understandings (or emphatic dissent), and what hierarchical negotiations does this joint activity involve?

These ideas are hard to convey when speaking in hypotheticals, so I hope to be forgiven for a brief diversion into the findings of my own research. This is firstly an attempt to demonstrate what the practical outcomes of asking such questions might be, and secondly to investigate further how audience research can help to widen apprehensions of expertise.

Studying how audiences developed relationships with a high-profile cultural organisation at the time of its formation – the then brand-new National Theatre Wales (NTW) – I used around 800 questionnaire responses and forty interviews to investigate both the kinds of people attracted to NTW’s launch-year shows and the *ways* different people reacted to them.<sup>82</sup> The majority of responses captured were to *For Mountain, Sand & Sea* and *The Persians*: two very different kinds of encounter, but both broadly structured around located performance frameworks. While *For Mountain, Sand & Sea* took the form of a walking tour of a Welsh seaside town (Barmouth) interspersed with vignettes of experimental physical performance, *The Persians* was a modern adaptation of Aeschylus’ ancient Greek text staged on Sennybridge military range in the Brecon Beacons. The tenor of responses for each production was markedly dissimilar: for example, *The Persians*’ audiences were far more likely to describe themselves as theatre-lovers, while *For Mountain, Sand & Sea* tended to attract those who wanted to see local history played out on a national stage. Whereas *The Persians* was praised for not being locally-focused or ‘inward looking’, this was precisely what many audience members anticipated from *For Mountain, Sand & Sea*.

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<sup>82</sup> See \_\_\_\_\_, *Locating the Audience*, for a more thoroughly-grounded analysis.

However, rather than offering the anticipated heritage-style re-enactment, *For Mountain, Sand & Sea* took the town's stories and used them as 'creative inspiration' for a ludic immersive encounter, in which audiences were invited to construct for themselves an imagined Barmouth from performed fragments. This research therefore allowed me to ask what happens when people who do not consider themselves theatregoers encounter art that may be considered 'difficult', in the sense of being purposefully experimental, modern, avant garde; abstract rather than representative; rhizomatic rather than linear. And with certain respondents expressing surprise and disappointment that the 'relevance' of scenes to Barmouth had been deliberately under-explained, this is where the focus on discourse became valuable. In certain interviews I identified a circling kind of rhetoric, which brought people with significant local knowledge to the brink of criticising *For Mountain, Sand & Sea* and back again:

You see, we know all these little bits but nothing came out in... That's why it's sad that their underpinning knowledge wasn't... Perhaps they didn't want to portray that, perhaps they were trying to portray something else, the theatre, I don't know.<sup>83</sup>

Finding this 'legitimacy loop' led to the conclusion that where local knowledge conflicts with a sense of professional theatrical expertise, it frequently loses the battle: that people who don't consider themselves 'theatre experts' often work to *disconfirm their own responses*, suggesting that they may be the 'wrong sort of person' to judge.<sup>84</sup> Why is this significant? Because while many people undeniably resist engaging in art on its own terms, rejecting artworks out of hand as deliberately obtuse, snobbish, and self-satisfied, it seems that others fail to find an entry-route into an experience despite concerted efforts to engage. Audiences do not necessarily have to be 'experts' in order to respond to art; art does not need to be understood in order to be meaningful; yet people do need to feel able to grasp how they are meant to be orienting themselves (physically, cognitively, emotionally) towards an experience in order to get something out of it. Far from being unable or unwilling to do the work that this demands, oftentimes audiences simply do not understand

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid, p. 87.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid, p. 86.

what kind of input is required.<sup>85</sup> By shedding light on both pleasures and disappointments, successes and frustrations, my project sought to capture something of the varying forms of effort, knowledge, and activity that enable certain audience members to gain value from performances where others feel shut out.

Of course, one danger of audience research is its vulnerability to instrumentalisation: the potential that it might be used to ‘dumb down’ culture by forcing institutions to ‘target [...] operations at a kind of bogus Joe Public figure’.<sup>86</sup> This is perhaps at the core of concerns that capturing audiences’ responses might lead to an affirmation of anti-expert thinking, and potentially even pose a danger to aesthetic integrity itself. As Paul Kosidowski evocatively suggests: ‘Perhaps the idea of listening to audiences is just too close to the idea of “giving them what they want” and all the crass populist pandering that the phrase implies’<sup>87</sup>. In this specific project, though, the subsequent discussions with National Theatre Wales were less concerned with the validity (or otherwise) of these expectations and responses – which undeniably went against the very grain of that event’s intentions – and more with how audiences might in future be better prepared for a playful, creative encounter with location rather than an informative history of place.<sup>88</sup> The intention of the research was therefore not to challenge expert critical perspectives on aesthetic value, but to add to this understanding new layers of richness and complexity.

So while a personal level I remain committed to the belief that expertise matters – that we need people able to deploy critically-informed perspectives in order to think carefully and deeply through the aesthetic encounter – it is also my suggestion that doing this and *only* this enables us to apprehend just a thin slice of the wider theatrical experience. The final section now follows these ideas through to a conclusion.

## Conclusion

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<sup>85</sup> I was able to explore this argument in much more detail in my article \_\_\_\_\_, ‘Ladies and Gentlemen Follow Me, Please Put on Your Beards’, *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 27, 1 (2017).

<sup>86</sup> Chris Goode, ‘The Audience is Listening’, *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 21, 4 (2011), pp. 464–71, p. 468.

<sup>87</sup> Kosidowski, ‘Thinking Through the Audience’, p. 84.

<sup>88</sup> \_\_\_\_\_, *Locating the Audience*, p. 164-165.



Writing about the rise and fall of theatre blogging, Matt Trueman considers the value of debate and disagreement within theatre criticism. Without the multiplicity of perspectives that are made visible when critics start 'piling into the same shows and tackling the same subjects', the discourse about theatre risks seeming 'flatter', less energetic. The key, of course, is the ability of these authors to apply a 'critical lens'. While they might disagree in their conclusions, and despite working in opposition to a system of old-school (and professionally reimbursed) mainstream arts criticism, these are voices that deserve to be taken seriously: they are capable of driving the conversation, moving the art form forward.<sup>89</sup> Meanwhile, there is a sense that listening to 'ordinary' audiences risks holding theatre back. While the task of interrogating tensions between alternative forms of knowledge has significant sociopolitical implications, audience research still risks being linked to a problematic neoliberal ideology that seeks to instrumentalize culture and thereby strip it of value. More specifically: Jen Harvie's *Fair Play* argues that the impact agenda presents significant danger to the arts, with funding allocation vulnerable to determination by spectatorial metrics of 'success'. In a market that increasingly positions audiences as consumers, the spectator 'may get what he wants, but to the detriment of a larger ecology of theatre and artwork'.<sup>90</sup>

However, as this article has explained, the history of academic audience research is a consistent narrative of resistance to seeing audiences as consumers or 'receivers' of meaning. Instead, the audience studies field has been determinedly studying how people from different subject positions and social locations actively make sense of things by drawing on varying 'cultural reference points, political beliefs, sexual preferences, personal histories, and immediate preoccupations'.<sup>91</sup> In other words, this long-running discipline is defined by decades of attempts to uncover not the 'truth' of cultural value, but rather the varying ways our assessments are bound up in our subject positions. How we judge something depends, literally, on *how* we judge it: we construct our value judgements through the systems of criteria we deploy.

This approach is not to deny the importance of critical expertise in constructing aesthetic valuations. Nor does it mean assessing cultural value as the middle-ground

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<sup>89</sup> Trueman, 'Why I'm Worried About the Decline of Theatre Blogs', *The Stage*, 15 December 2016.

<sup>90</sup> Harvie, *Fair Play: Art, Performance and Neoliberalism* (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2013).

average of a range of people's ratings. Nor does it necessarily precipitate advocacy of 'giving audiences what they want'. Sometimes the outcome of such research can simply be to prompt important conversations about how an event might be framed. How to encourage audiences to experience theatre from inside a place of cultural confidence; how to help them feel they have understood what a performance is asking of them (in terms of quality of attention rather than prescribed meanings); how to encourage them to think deeply about these experiences, and to make sense of them in meaningful ways. Moreover, as Katya Johnson and Hilary Glow demonstrate, with those writing from critically-informed perspectives still likely to experience an 'ease of cultural consumption' that people from marginalised social and racial backgrounds often find harder to access,<sup>92</sup> audience research also has the potential to produce necessary interventions in a cultural narrative that remains predominantly Western-centric, white-dominated, and class-privileged.<sup>93</sup> While audience research has to date taken place primarily in English-speaking and/or Western areas, a necessary area for future expansion is to extend these enquiries into intercultural theatrical contexts. Both the Globe's research into their globally-touring Hamlet production and Johanson and Glow's study of indigenous performances have made a valuable start, although these have self-admittedly focused on a Western production touring into non-Western countries, and on an event featuring indigenous performers encountered by a predominantly white middle-class audience respectively, rather than on the value of intercultural theatrical forms within their own communities. Here then is a major gap – indeed, one with significant geopolitical implications, and one which moreover has begun to be addressed only recently, for example by the publication here in *Theatre Research International* of Awo Mana Asiedu's article 'The Money Was Real Money', which details audiences' experiences at the Ghana National Theatre.<sup>94</sup> As Asiedu compellingly demonstrates, one outcome of audience research is to explore how international communities manage their interpretations of different plays, and in so doing to shed fresh light on the interplay between aesthetic and sociocultural value systems. And sometimes

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<sup>91</sup> Freshwater, p. 6.

<sup>92</sup> Johanson and Glow, 'A Virtuous Circle', *Participations* 12, 1 (2015), pp. 254–270.

<sup>93</sup> See for example David Osa Amadasun's 'Black People Don't Go to Galleries', also cited in Johanson and Glow's article, which demonstrates the restrictive power of arts institutions for many people of colour.

<sup>94</sup> Asiedu, 'The Money Was Real Money', *Theatre Research International* 41, 2 (2016), pp. 151–167.

there is value enough in simply rounding out our apprehension of theatrical experience, by inviting competing voices and alternative perspectives to weigh in.

Crucially, this also separates the audience studies tradition from projects that employ psychophysiological methods to measure audiences' reactions.<sup>95</sup> While 'result' studies aim to investigate how audiences understand and articulate their responses after the event has ended, these 'process' studies are designed to discover what audiences are doing *during* the act of watching.<sup>96</sup> In their 2006 book *Performance and Cognition* Bruce McConachie and F. Elizabeth Hart offered the provocation: 'Why should we turn to cognitive studies for epistemological justification? Isn't this framework just as good as any other as a road to truth? We argue that it is better'.<sup>97</sup> I close this article with the contention that such epistemological divisions are now standing in the way of developing a more nuanced understanding of cultural value. The neuroaesthetic studies that McConachie and Hart describe are uniquely qualified to produce information about what physically occurs within people's bodies and brains while a performance is taking place; in isolation, however, such approaches are unable to capture what people *do* with these experiences. How do they integrate these theatrical encounters, and the thoughts and sensations they generate, into their everyday lives? From critical analysis to 'big data' quantitative surveys to neuroaesthetics, each approach is able to capture a particular kind of knowledge: each has its own strengths; each brings with it particular limitations. Instead of fighting for our place in the methodological hierarchy we should therefore be combining forces, investigating a singular aesthetic event from a range of angles and seeing what picture our combined conclusions might form. In such a project, audience research can play an important part.

Indeed, the need to understand diverse value systems has never been more acute. Rather than listening only to people whose judgments constitute 'valid' critique, future audience studies must therefore work to investigate how people come to differing viewpoints: how they invest in them, how they imbue them with validity. In theatre as in politics, listening does not mean legitimising. We do not have to agree with audiences, and

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<sup>95</sup> Neuroaesthetics etc. But not new – David W. Addington in his paper 'Varieties of Audience Research' (1974) offers a summary of early theatre audience research.

<sup>96</sup> Henri Schoenmaker, quoted in Laura Ginters, 'On Audiencing', *About Performance*, 10, pp. 7-14, p. 9

<sup>97</sup> See e.g. Bruce McConachie and F. Elizabeth Hart's foray into neuroscience, detailed in *Performance and Cognition* (London: Routledge, 2006), p. ix.

we do not necessarily need to act on the things we hear, but we do need to pay attention – if only then because we might be better placed to push back against the insidious creep of post-truth thinking, and its contiguous erosion of expertise.